

One of the first words I learned after reaching Brazil was the word bicho. The old timers told me I would need to know that word right away, not only because of the abundance of the object, but because of the elasticity of the word's meaning. They told me it can mean "anything from a flea to an elephant" -- any sort of animal within that extensive range, but it is most appropriately applied to the smaller and more noxious animals, such as insects, spiders, scorpions, centipedes and snakes. There is a large and interesting variety of these to be found in north Brazil.

Most North Americans, if they think of Brazil at all, think of it as a steaming tropical jungle, crawling with snakes. Part of it is jungle all right, and there are plenty of snakes; but they are not nearly so numerous as I had imagined before going there. Walking about the fields, one meets with a snake occasionally, but not so frequently as in the eastern United States. It is said that there is no region in the world where poisonous snakes are more numerous than in the mountainous parts of New York and Pennsylvania.

The Portuguese word for snake is cobra (pronounced caw-bra), which of course is a corruption of the Latin word colubra. The snakes known in English as cobras are not found anywhere in the New World; but it was the early Portuguese settlers in India that gave the name, first to the cobra de capello (hooded snake), and afterwards it came to be applied to all the others of the same family, the various cobras of Asia and Africa. But in Portuguese any snake is a cobra.

The most celebrated snakes of Brazil are the giant anacondas of the Amazon valley. Arguments rage continually about the size attained by these snakes, and every now and then there appears in the newspapers in Brazil some story of a traveler who claims to have seen one a hundred feet long or more. I remember seeing in a newspaper in Belem in April, 1949 an account of a snake forty meters long; and I have a picture post card purchased in Manaus, showing a picture of a snake of about that length. I believe the picture is a fake, however, and I doubt very seriously that they ever attain twenty

meters in length, much less forty, though it is probable that there may be larger ones in the forest than any that have yet been killed or captured.

In Pernambuco large boa constrictors are rare, though one hears stories at times of the discovery of a so-called cobra de veado (deer snake). Small boas, six or eight feet long, are common enough, and while one might bite if cornered, they are non poisonous, and generally inoffensive.

The snake most dreaded generally in Pernambuco is the cascavel (rattlesnake). This snake is unlike his North American cousins in two particulars. In the first place, he seldom gives warning, but usually strikes first, and rattles afterwards. And in the second place, his poison is not the haematotoxic type, attacking the blood stream, as is the case with most snakes in the New World, but is neurotoxic, attacking the heart and nerve centers, as does that of the cobras of the old world.

The bushmaster, one of the world's largest poisonous snakes, attains a length of twelve feet or more. The Brazilians call him by the name given by the Tupí Indians, Surucucú, or surucucutinga. This is a very dangerous snake, as it is insolent and aggressive, in addition to, or perhaps because of, its great size. Fortunately, it is rare in Pernambuco, though I have heard one or two men tell of seeing them.

The jararaca and jararacuçu are common types of poisonous snakes, the latter being considered especially quick to strike. There are the coral snakes also, fascinatingly beautiful with their red and black stripes. While they are small, the poison is very powerful, so that the bite of this little snake may easily prove fatal. When I had been in Brazil but a few months I was shocked to see my little two year old come running into the bedroom early in the morning with a coral snake in her hand. Recognizing the snake at a glance I screamed to her to put it down; but I was relieved to find that it was dead, something, probably the cat, having killed it during the night. Besides the true coral snake, there is a harmless snake that imitates very closely the markings of it, so that it is difficult for a layman to tell them apart. The safer plan is to kill the snake on suspicion.

It gives me the creeps to see a centipede. The Brazilians call it pioelho de cobra, (snake louse). The biggest one I ever saw must have been fully nine inches long, and



was a fearsome object to see. One of our teachers found him in a store room at the school. But centipedes four or five inches long are quite common, and are considered very dangerous. The centipede bites with his head, stings with his tail, and scratches with all the legs in between. The last pair of legs are specialized as stingers, but besides thrusting these in as far as possible, he manages in most cases to force the other legs into the skin, so that it is necessary to tear the creature loose from his victim. Our cook was sleeping one night rolled up in a blanket, as is their custom, when she discovered that she had rolled a centipede up with her in the blanket, and it bit and stung her on the thigh, in the manner just described. She was ill for several days, with slight fever, and her leg swelled considerably, but she did not have to stop work entirely. One hears stories among the Brazilians of persons being permanently crippled in an arm or a leg from the bite of the centipede, though the disability is probably due to infection in the wound rather than to the actual poison of the "bicho". I cannot remember ever hearing of a death from such a bite.

Centipedes have a way of turning up in unexpected places. In 1936 my wife was very ill, and we were taking her to Recife to the hospital, in a hired car, as we had no car of our own at the time. We left early in the morning, and about twenty-five miles down the road we stopped to get some coffee. My wife opened her purse to get a comb for her hair, and seeing something inside, threw the purse through the open door of the car. As it went through the air I saw that there was a centipede in the purse. It evidently liked its quarters, for the chauffeur and I had difficulty in getting it out with a stick, where we could kill it. Oddly enough, this little fright seemed to serve as a stimulant -- or maybe it was the coffee -- and my wife felt better the rest of the way.

Tarantulas are not nearly so dangerous as was once supposed, but they bite viciously, and often make a serious wound. A friend of mine went to put on his boots one morning, and found a tarantula in the boot, which bit his toe. He told me that he felt no ill effects whatever from the bite, but stated that the wound bled freely, and that is perhaps the reason. Tarantulas are very common, and I must have killed as many as twenty in the house, during the years I spent there, and others outside. Some of them

were large, with the legs extended being almost as large as a dinner plate. Their huge, hairy bodies and legs are enough to frighten one to death, even if he were not bitten. They are not difficult to kill, but can run pretty fast. The Brazilian name for the tarantula is caranguejeira, from carangueijo, a crab; the supposition being that its bite made one walk like a crab.

In north Brazil a scorpion is generally called a lacrau. Scorpions are plentiful and troublesome. They are often met with in the house. I do not know where they come from, but they appear. Moving the baby's bed away from the wall one day my wife found a very large one. People always make it a point never to go around the house barefoot at night, as there is always the chance of stepping on a scorpion. I did actually step on one one night, as we will always be careless now and then; but by some lucky chance was not stung, due I suppose to the position in which my foot happened to catch him. The sting is extremely painful, and makes one ill for a time. If the sting is about the head or face it may even cause death in rare cases. One of my janitors was stung on the hand, and lost two or three days from work, and for some time afterwards he could not make proper use of that hand.

An interesting "bicho" is the poto, (pronounced paw-taw). This is a small flying insect, generally less than an inch in length, with the tail turned upward for half or more of its length. This bug, if touched, exudes some sort of highly poisonous liquid, which is capable of producing a bad sore. It is popularly supposed that this liquid is the creature's urine, but I do not know if this is true. A poto can fly by anyone, just touching his face or hand in passing; but this liquid is so highly irritating that even the slightest contact with it causes severe disturbances, something like a burn in character.

Fleas used to be one of our major problems in the interior, but they are being controlled now by the modern insecticides. Many of the houses have brick floors, and the cracks in these made excellent cover for the fleas. Whenever one went, in the old days, to church or to the theater, he would often return with a generous supply of fleas in his clothes. One man told me that he and his wife came home one night,



and as the wife felt that she had more than her usual quota of fleas, they resolved to make a count. She took off her clothes, piece by piece, handing him the garments, from which he caught and killed the fleas. The result of this strip-tease, or strip-fleas, was twenty-seven killed, besides wounded and missing.

That made a pretty good story, but I believe I can match it with percevejos, (bed bugs). By the way, a thumb tack is called in Portuguese a percevejo. There was a special service one Sunday night at one of the churches, and as the regular seats were not sufficient, they had borrowed chairs from various homes for the occasion. When I went in, as I was a person of some importance, being the "diretor" of the "colegio", the ushers led me down to the very front row, and seated me in a wicker chair. During the service I saw what appeared to be a flea, walking on the front of my white suit, and tried surreptitiously to kill it. In fact, I did kill it, and as it seemed unusually easy to kill, I smelled of my fingers, and found that it was a bed bug. Chairs sometimes get infested with them, and this one was a prize winner. Soon I saw another, larger one, and not long after another. All through the service they kept appearing, and I felt that my back must be crawling with them. Immediately after the close of the service I hurried home, and carefully removing my clothes I looked over them painstakingly, afterward spraying each piece with insecticide. To the best of my recollection I found sixteen, besides the six or seven I had killed during the service. I imagined the bed bugs as saying, "Boys, here's our chance to get some white meat. We'd better make the most of it."

Perhaps the most characteristic "bicho" of them all is the bicho de pé (foot bug). This is a tiny, burrowing flea, which works its way through the skin, and then feeding itself on its host's blood, grows, and becomes distended with eggs, often becoming as large as a pea. It sometimes attacks the hands, but generally the feet, the favorite spot being around or under the toenails. If not removed, the bug finally festers and makes a bad sore; and I believe I have heard that in untended cases the eggs hatch out and form new bugs, thus spreading the trouble; but I am not positive of this, as I have never seen a case so neglected.

The outward sign of a bicho de pé is a little swelling, with a festered appearance, and a black speck in the center. It is a simple matter to remove one. Some people use a needle, but I always preferred to slice off the top with a razor blade, and then the bug may be removed, often whole, but sometimes it is necessary to tear it up. A needle or pin may be used after the opening is made. I always preferred to use the head of a pin, working it under the bug. It leaves a little round hole, which should then be treated with a liberal application of tincture of iodine, and it will be well in a very short time. But if a part of the bug is left in the place, especially if the iodine is not applied thoroughly, a bad sore may result.

*X'store*